

Staff Sgt. Johnny Reeves answered the call

Lydia Burns is a home-schooled 14-year-old who lives on a small family farm in Collinsville. Her parents are Hank and Pam Burns and she has three younger siblings. The family attends Macedonia Baptist Church.

A letter to the editor of *The Meridian Star* led to Lydia's friendship with Staff Sgt. Johnny Reeves of the U.S. Army Reserve's 1181st Transportation Terminal Unit. The 1181st is one of two Army Reserve units based in Meridian; the other is the 3-83rd Artillery, Battery A. Johnny deployed to Kuwait in June 2003 and returned in June 2004. The two new friends corresponded through e-mail while he was there.

Johnny is a native of Decatur and attends Conehatta Baptist Church. In civilian life, he drives a truck for EBY-BROWN — but he's currently on active duty again at a port in Savannah, Ga.

By Lydia Burns

special to The Star

Complete isolation. That's what Staff Sgt. Johnny Reeves felt as he stepped off the airplane and into a very different world.

For as long as he can remember, he's wanted to be a soldier, just like his dad and uncles. As a boy growing up in Decatur, one of Reeves' favorite games was playing Army. He always knew that one day he would make his dream of becoming a soldier a reality.

During his junior year of high school, joined the Army National Guard. For him, boot camp began in 1982 at Fort McClellan, Ala.

"It wasn't as hard as I thought it would be, (but) it really made me grow up," he said.

Now, getting off an airplane in Kuwait, Reeves was staring at what would be an entire year of his future. This would be his first "real" mission. So many feelings rushed through him as he looked around. All of those hours of training and hard work had been to prepare him for this ... war.

”



The very first thing he did after getting back was hug his kids. No. 2 on his list was a long, hot bath ... Finally, he fixed himself a good old-fashioned tomato sandwich. It was the little things that were blessings.

Lydia Burns

The 1181st mission

Even though the long airplane ride to Kuwait had been tiring for all 70 members of the 1181st Transportation Terminal Unit, going to bed that first night was difficult. Imagine trying to sleep peacefully when you don't feel safe and might never wake up.

The first full day overseas was interesting. Reeves could not help noticing how early the sun rose. At 4 a.m., the sun was already halfway up. Like coastal sunrises, it almost looked as if he could reach out and touch the bright glow that hovered over Kuwait's barren terrain.

Unlike Mississippi, which often gets too much rain, the land was simply a desert — no lakes, no trees and hardly any grass.

"We saw very little grass there ... just flat land with some scrub brush," Reeves said.

But the biggest shock was the heat. By 4 in the morning, it was 100 degrees and the temperature often soared above the 140-degree mark. Thankfully, Reeves and his fellow soldiers had air conditioners in their tents, tents that housed 10 people each.

The 1181st Transportation unit's job was unloading and loading ships during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The troops used cranes and forklifts to unload trucks, tanks and helicopters. They moved all the essentials for soldiers, like ammunition, tents and food. On average, it took two days to unload a ship, and some ships held over 1,400 pieces of cargo.

The unit worked around the clock, 24/7, in 12- to 16-hour shifts. Reeves was responsible for the hazardous materials that were loaded and unloaded.

Links to home

In spite of the grueling hours, Reeves made a little time each day to relax and keep in contact with the outside world. The hardest thing about being overseas was



SUBMITTED PHOTO

1181ST TRANSPORTATION TERMINAL UNIT

Staff Sgt. Johnny Reeves of Decatur said the members of the 1181st Transportation Terminal Unit became close during their year in Kuwait: "We were each others' support when the bad times happened."

being separated from the people he loves.

"I missed the kids the most," he said.

So, he loved having access to phones and being able to e-mail his 14-year-old daughter, Kellye, and his 9-year-old son, Justin.

Reading *The Meridian Star* online became a daily routine. It was through *The Meridian Star* that I "met" Sgt. Johnny Reeves. He had written a letter to the editor asking where his unit's support was.

"We have not received one care package or word of hope from Meridian," his letter read. "One day, we will be home again and I hope Meridian will honor us like it has other units that have been profiled in your paper."

Knowing that the 1181st felt terrible made me feel terrible.

So, I took the newspaper to the 4-H Personal Development Club. I asked if everyone would like to write letters to

the 1181st. The response was a unanimous "yes." The club's volunteer leader got mailing information for all the members of the 1181st. Everyone in the club picked one or two soldiers' names.

I decided to write Sgt. Reeves. He answered the first e-mail I sent almost immediately. For the six months that remained of his tour in Kuwait, I wrote to him often. No matter how exhausted or busy he was, Sgt. Reeves always replied to my e-mails quickly — if only just to tell me, "Hey, I got your message, and thanks."

Band of brothers

"Christmas was really hard being away," Reeves said.

Meridian celebrated Christmas 2003 with the bright lights, activities and family get-togethers that Reeves missed so much. Meanwhile, the

1181st played "dirty Santa" and had a "Charlie Brown Christmas tree." The holiday meals were pretty good, better than the everyday rations.

"The food was OK — the longer we stayed, the better it got," Reeves said. "It wasn't home cooking but we survived on it."

For his birthday, the unit surprised Reeves with a cake which was cut into small pieces so he could share it.

"I formed some lasting friendships with a lot of my unit members," he said. "We all shared some good times and some bad. We were each others' support when the bad times happened."

The soldiers got to know each other so well that it seemed like they had been buddies since kindergarten.

Coming home

Finally! After 365 seemingly endless days in Kuwait, the 1181st was headed home!

As the unit boarded an airplane for home, Reeves thought about his year. It had been difficult; there was no denying that. But it hadn't been all bad. He said the best thing was making new friends and meeting people from other parts of the world.

"I do not regret giving that

year to my country," he said. "I would do it again."

Reeves also believes in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"I think we did the right thing going over there and getting Saddam. I just wish that it would be over with so all the troops could come home."

And home is exactly where he would be again soon.

The very first thing he did after getting back was hug his kids. No. 2 on his list was a long, hot bath — something he had missed overseas, where there were only showers and bathing was useless because he was drenched in sweat again quickly. Finally, he fixed himself a good old-fashioned tomato sandwich. It was the little things that were blessings.

Now, almost nine months after coming home, Reeves has settled into the swing of things. And just because he is no longer overseas doesn't mean he has stopped serving his country. Currently, he is on active duty in Savannah, Ga.

Looking back, Reeves says: "Even though I hated being over there, I can now look back on it with pride. I was there and did my part to help."

To me, that is what makes Sgt. Johnny Reeves a true hero!



SUBMITTED PHOTO

BEAST OF BURDEN

Staff Sgt. Johnny Reeves of the U.S. Army Reserve's 1181st Transportation Terminal Unit makes a new friend in Kuwait. Reeves said getting used to the landscape was a challenge: "We saw very little grass there ... just flat land with some scrub brush."